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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: THE U.S. AND TAIWAN'S UN REFERENDUM

¶1. Summary: Taiwan's major Chinese-language dailies focused news coverage September 18-19 on Typhoon Wipha, which hit Taiwan Tuesday; on the island's UN referendum and the 62nd session of the UN General Assembly, which is set to convene in New York today; and on an American citizen who was arrested in Kaohsiung Monday on suspicion of murdering a Taiwan woman. The pro-independence "Liberty Times" ran a banner headline on page two September 19 that said "The United States Does Not Plan to Speak [of Its Opposition to] Taiwan's UN Bid at the UN General Assembly Session." The centrist, KMT-leaning "China Times," however, ran a banner headline on page two on September 19 that read "[To Fight] the UN Battle, Taiwan Plans to File a Suit to the International Court of Justice."

¶2. In terms of editorials and commentaries, a "Liberty Times" editorial called on more high-level dialogue between Taiwan and the United States to resolve the bilateral disputes over the island's UN referendum. An op-ed in the pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" said the United States should consider Taiwan's needs and take the Taiwan issue to the UN for discussion. A separate "Taipei Times" op-ed said Washington opposes Taiwan's UN referendum because it believes that it is against its national interests. A "China Times" analysis, on the other hand, speculated on the measures Washington will adopt to "punish" Taiwan for the UN referendum. Two editorials in the conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" also questioned whether Washington is at its wit's end in dealing with President Chen Shui-bian. End summary.

A) "More High-level Dialogue Is Needed between Taiwan and the United States"

The pro-independence "Liberty Times" [circulation: 720,000] editorialized (9/19):

"On September 11, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Thomas Christensen criticized Taiwan's UN referendum at the Taiwan-U.S. Defense Industry Conference. But the host of this conference, U.S.-Taiwan Business Council President Rupert Hammond-Chambers, wrote an article two days later defending Taiwan against such criticism. Christensen emphasized that the differences between Taiwan and the United States over the UN referendum were not out of misunderstanding or lack of communication, but Hammond-Chambers pointed out that a major reason [behind the bilateral differences] was because Taiwan and the United States have failed to establish a regular high-level dialogue. ...

"Both Taiwan and the United States are democratic countries, and by rights, the communication between Taipei and Washington should be much easier than that between Beijing and Washington. It is a pity that given the twisted international power politics, China and the United States have enjoyed frequent high-level communication and exchange of visits, whereas the high-level interaction between Taiwan and the United States has been quite rare. Besides, whenever

there was any friction between Beijing and Washington, or when China sought to threaten Taiwan militarily, the United States' punishment against China was always light and insubstantial. In the face of such undisguised double standards, wouldn't [the United States] be afraid of creating anti-U.S. sentiment in the Taiwan society?

"The Taiwan people's UN referendum is aimed at expressing their will and highlighting the spirit of sovereignty resting with the people via democratic procedures. The Taiwan people's pursuit of the UN referendum and their move to ensure the island's national sovereignty by buying weapons to defend themselves are consistent with the United States' founding spirit. The United States, as a democracy, should support Taiwan's UN referendum. How can it suppress the fundamental human rights of the Taiwan people just to cater to totalitarian China? Christensen has appealed to the Taiwan people in his speech. Shouldn't he then respect the democratic choice made by the Taiwan people?

"The differences between Taiwan and the United States were brought to the surface because of the UN referendum; both Christensen's harsh comment and Washington's decision to postpone the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Taiwan have grieved [the United States'] close friend but gladdened its enemy. For many years, Taiwan's moves to maintain its national sovereignty have been, without any exception, labeled by China as actions to 'alter the status quo unilaterally' and to 'move toward Taiwan independence.' Now even the United States is pointing its finger at Taiwan and overlooks the fact that it is China that has been constantly seeking to change the status quo unilaterally. Our question is: Does this really meet the U.S. interests?

"The various remarks and deeds by the U.S. government in opposing the UN referendum indicated that [Washington] did not bother to cover up the priorities of the U.S. interests. But among all these, there are obviously two points that do not meet the U.S. interests. First, both Taiwan and the United States are democratic countries,

but they lack high-level communication. The fact that Taiwan's democratic conducts have been constantly been misunderstood by the United States is evidently unfavorable [for the U.S. efforts] to promote democratic values. Second, in order to teach those who push for the UN referendum a lesson, Washington sits idly and watches the military balance across the Taiwan Strait tipped over to China by postponing the sale of important preventive weapons to Taiwan. The United States will have to pay a bigger price should any conflict break out across the Taiwan Strait.

"Not only so. Will situations like the lack of high-level communication between Taiwan and the United States, the differences between the two over the UN referendum, and the postponed deal of F-16 fighter jets make China more willing to maintain the status quo across the Taiwan Strait? We believe the answer is no. If Taiwan-U.S. relations reach a deadlock because of the UN referendum, China will be very happy to seize this opportunity to squeeze Taiwan's elbow room [in the international community], including via diplomatic containment and military intimidation, and gradually take over Taiwan. Should this happen, the democracy and prosperity taking shape on the island will become nothing but empty talk, and China's military hegemony will start to dominate the Asia-Pacific region with irresistible power."

B) "US Should Consider Taiwan's Needs"

Professor Chen Hurng -yu from Tamkang University opined in the pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" [circulation: 30,000] (9/18):

"... Christensen's points are a review of what has been US policy for years in the triangular relationship between the US, China and Taiwan. The US thinks that in this situation, Taiwan should not act rashly, to avoid breaking the triangular framework that has gradually taken shape over time. But this framework is based on the US' strategic ideas about East Asia, and does not take Taiwan's situation and needs into account. The shrinking of Taiwan's international space has taken shape under this framework, and under it, in the long term Taiwan will have no international space left. ...

"The US is using three methods to avert China's military threat against Taiwan. The first is persuading China to restrain itself. The second is selling arms to Taiwan. The third is opposing Taiwan's 'provocative behavior.' This is a passive approach, playing a game of balance. Why doesn't the US take the Taiwan issue to the UN to debate it? It could allow the UN to safeguard Taiwan's safety by thoroughly clearing away China's threats to Taiwan. Christensen said in his speech that the US government was 'trying to help preserve and expand the Taiwan people's international space.' How can we put this statement to the test? The US State Department could consider, or not be opposed to, taking the Taiwan issue to the UN for discussion. It could support Taiwan in setting up a Taiwan liaison office in the UN. It could reconcile its conflicts with Taiwan. Then we would know we can believe Christensen's words."

C) "US Believes Referendum Is against Its Interests"

Professor Edward Chen from Tamkang University's Graduate Institute of American Studies opined in the pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" [circulation: 30,000] (9/18):

"... But why would a referendum on UN membership hurt the interests of the US and Taiwan, and force the US to strongly oppose it? The first reason is, as Christensen said in his speech, that the US' Taiwan Strait policy from 1979 has been beneficial to both Americans and Taiwanese. ... What he didn't say was, if Taiwan provoked China, for example, by holding a referendum on applying for UN membership, this would not be in the US' interest, and so it might make an exception to its policy. As to the second reason, Christensen said there was 'absolutely no foundation to the assertion that the US coordinates its Taiwan policy with Beijing.'

"China and the US are working together in trying to maintain the 'status quo' in the Taiwan Strait. Both want to prevent Taiwanese independence and encourage cross-strait talks, but that is not the same as the US coordinating its Taiwan policy with China. However, it cannot be denied that China influences Taiwan through the US, and Beijing is putting increasing pressure on Washington. The underlying meaning in Christensen's words is that if Taiwan continues to push for holding the referendum, this would harm US interests, and the possibility of the US and China coordinating their Taiwan policy cannot be ruled out. ... In a situation when diplomacy doesn't cut it, a direct appeal to the Taiwanese public, although it can't stop a referendum, could dampen enthusiasm for it, diminish its legitimacy and cause it to fail."

D) "How Will the United States and China Respond to the New Development Concerning the UN Referendum?"

Journalist Huang Ching-lung, currently also a visiting scholar at the Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution, noted in an analysis in the centrist, KMT-leaning "China Times" [circulation: 400,000] (9/19):

"... The reason why the UN referendum under the name Taiwan has annoyed Washington is mainly because it has offended and collided with the United States' ambiguous strategy, forcing Washington to make a choice between China and Taiwan. For the United States, this is a very difficult choice: It cannot possibly give up Taiwan's strategic interests, but on the other hand, its complex but mutually beneficial relationship with China is the national interests it must pay close attention to. Therefore, officials in the State Department, the National Security Council, and even a majority of the Republican and Democratic congressmen as well as experts on cross-Strait issues in major U.S. think tanks tend to believe that the UN referendum will sabotage the cross-Strait status quo, increase difficulty for Washington to handle the changing situation across the Taiwan Strait, and thus seriously violate the U.S. interests. President Chen Shui-bian and the DPP government is now facing overwhelming pressure from the United States.

"Then, what kind of measures will the United States likely adopt to 'punish' Taiwan? Will it cancel or postpone the arms deals? Will it let Taiwan lose several of its allies in Central America? Even though these moves may be effective in 'waking up' [Taiwan], but also have some side effects and thus may not meet the U.S. interests. Washington surely hopes that the UN referendum could be

revoked, but it obviously knows that the chances are slim for that to happen. As a result, the United States can only 'place its hope in the Taiwan people;' it appealed directly to the Taiwan people in the hope that 'Taiwan's perspective, intelligent citizens will see through the rhetoric and make a sound judgment.' (Quote from Christensen) But what if the referendum is passed? Perhaps when that happens, Washington can only make necessary 'damage control' -- namely, it can directly negotiate with the president-elect about how to interpret such a [referendum] result, and ask the president-elect to make an announcement during his inauguration ceremony on May 20, 2008. It should be something that Washington expects to see if similar pledge like the 'Four Nos and One Without' made in 2000 is made the next year. ..."

E) "Credibility of U.S. Is Being Questioned"

The conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" [circulation: 30,000] editorialized (9/19):

"After high-ranking U.S. officials openly and solemnly stated that Taiwan's referendum on the U.N. bid 'is Taiwan independence,' all China watchers around the world are anxious to see what measures Washington will take to stop President Chen Shui-bian from taking this dangerous move to undermine regional stability in the Taiwan Strait. Americans must act -- effectively -- if Washington officials are responsible for what they say, and if the long-standing U.S. policy of firmly opposing Taiwan independence really means business. No one would believe the United States, the strongest and most important ally of Taiwan, cannot do it if it wants to. However, the American weakness in dealing with an audacious President Chen as indicated by a response in the form of a speech, entitled 'A Strong and Moderate Taiwan,' delivered by Thomas Christensen, U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, on Sept. 11, should have surprised most observers. ...

"It is indeed incredible to see how the United States, whose support is essential to Taiwan's survival under Beijing's threats, feels helpless in facing an irrational and stubborn government in Taipei that insists on pursuing its independence course against its own interest and that of the U.S. Several observations may be made:

First, the lack of an effective U.S. response in terms of blocking Chen's behavior may indicate that Washington has been persuaded by the president behind-the-scenes that his proposal for the referendum is not yet the realization of Taiwan independence. If so, why did high Washington officials make the unequivocal statement equating the referendum with Taiwan independence in the first place? They should be faulted for irresponsibility in making over-statements or misstatements that have generated global tensions and damaged U.S. credibility as a world leader.

"Second, if the U.S. really believes the referendum is tantamount to Taiwan independence, it must take immediate actions to stop it, as it will inevitably lead to war with Beijing. Americans should be held at least morally responsible for any military conflict in the Taiwan Strait with disastrous consequences because it has the power to prevent it but it does not. Third, the speech emphasized that the long-term friendship and cooperation between the peoples of the United States and Taiwan remain strong. In other words, the U.S. intends to show it opposes President Chen, but not the Taiwan

people, attempting to separate the two. The U.S. will probably fail in this effort because President Chen is universally acknowledged as a master in terms of understanding the psychology of Taiwan voters and hence knows how to influence them better than all his political rivals in Taiwan, let alone Americans. He wants to closely bind himself with 23 million people on the island. ...

"Fourth, since President Chen has less than a year in office, utmost tolerance has been displayed by all sides, including the U.S., with regard to the wanton behavior of the president. The general consensus is that the president will lose much of his political clout once he steps down. This may turn out to be wishful thinking. Chen may be able to lead the 20-30 percent of the 'deep green' after his presidential term expires so as to control the DPP to control the nation. ... Still vigorous physically, ambitious politically and artful in maneuvering tactics, Chen may stage an unprecedented comeback in Taiwan politics four years after 2008.

"Fifth, the U.S. has treated President Chen with excessive indulgence which may have the effect of emboldening other DPP leaders in the future to act recklessly on the question of Taiwan independence, believing they can do so with American acquiescence. When one detects the kind of U.S. feebleness as conveyed by Christensen's speech, one cannot but aggress with some critics that Washington is indeed a 'paper tiger.' A great superpower should not be perceived as such. Any serious miscalculation in Taipei thus entailed may lead to disaster for which Washington should be held accountable because of its unwillingness to do what should be done to prevent it. A plausible explanation for the U.S. behavior may be that Washington is so eager to have Taiwan exit within its sphere of influence that it is willing to indulge its leaders, to the extent that it ends up getting exactly the opposite -- destroying and losing an important strategic partner."

F) "Is the U.S. at Wit's End?"

The conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" [circulation: 30,000] editorialized (9/18):

"It is unprecedented for Taiwan's leaders of both the ruling and opposition parties to openly challenge a pronounced policy of the United States, supposedly the 'mentor and protector' of the island since the 1950s. Never before has a public policy debate in Taiwan put the U.S. in such an awkward position, damned if it tolerates the pro-independence referendum and damned if it opposes it. (The U.S. is one of 163 subscribing nations to Beijing's 'one China' principle that 'there is only one China in the world and Taiwan is part of one China.') Having successfully tutored Taiwan on democracy and protected the island from a communist takeover for 60 years, the U.S. now finds itself an unwelcome intruder in Taiwan's presidential election politics. ..."

YOUNG